

Isaac Hull
AND
Frigate "Constitution."



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AND
American Frigate "Constitution."

LETTER ACCOMPANYING PICTURE

PRESENTED TO THE
BOSTONIAN SOCIETY

BY
BENJAMIN F. STEVENS

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WILLIAM CLARENCE BURRAGE,
Secretary.

DEAR SIR:—

I have the honor of presenting to the Bostonian Society a finely engraved portrait of Commodore ISAAC HULL, taken by his order from a painting by the celebrated Gilbert Stuart in the year 1813, to which is attached a vignette of the famous battle between the American frigate “Constitution” and the English frigate “Guerriere,” drawn by the order of Hull himself. The portrait must have been an exceptionally good one to have warranted so fine a reproduction by the engraver’s art. I cannot help thinking that the engraving is a very rare one, and well worth being in possession of this institution. It is one of the traditions of the United States navy that for general seamanship, and especially for skill in handling and managing his ship, Commodore Hull was at the top of his profession; and, as will be shown in the course of this narrative, there are grounds for belief that his equal has never been seen in the American navy.

Isaac Hull was born at Derby, Conn., May 9, 1775, and entered the merchant service, in which he remained till 1798, at the commencement of hostilities with France, when he was commissioned a lieutenant in the navy. In 1800 he was first lieutenant of the "Constitution," or "Old Ironsides," the ship which afterward became so famous under his command in the war between Great Britain and the United States in 1812-15. In that year he cut out a French letter of marque from under the guns of a battery in the harbor of Port Platte, San Domingo. In one sense the active life of Isaac Hull is identified with the services of the most renowned ship of our navy.

During the war with Tripoli, 1802 to 1805, he served with distinction in the several attacks on that power (July, August, and September, 1804), and subsequently co-operated with Gen. William Eaton, our navy agent in Tunis, in the capture of Derne. In 1806 he was posted as full captain. In 1812 he was put in command of the "Constitution;" and in July of that year, while cruising off New York, he fell in with a British squadron, consisting of the "Africa," a razee of 64 guns, the "Shannon" and "Guerriere," frigates of 38 guns each, and the "Belvidere" of 36 guns, and the "Æolus" of 32 guns, and a brig and schooner. This squadron was on the lookout for Commodore

Rogers, who had sailed from New York with a small squadron on the 21st of June, three days after the declaration of war. The "Constitution" obtained a position to the windward of the enemy. She set her light sails, and at 7.30 P.M. beat to quarters and cleared ship for action, in hopes of cutting off the nearest ship. At 10 the "Constitution" shortened sail and showed the private signal of the day; but, receiving no answer from the British frigate, she took in her signal lights and cleared to the eastward under easy sail. From henceforward commenced one of the most brilliant achievements ever recorded in the annals of naval history, to which I shall refer later on.

The "Constitution" returned to Boston after this wonderful escape, the details of which are so romantic, to be enthusiastically received by its citizens. Lieut. Charles Morris was always supposed to be the originator of the "kedging" by which the "Constitution" evaded the enemy. Upon arriving at the Exchange Coffee House, Capt. Hull indorsed the following acknowledgment upon the register:—

"Capt. Hull, finding his friends in Boston are correctly informed of his situation when chased by the British squadron off New York, and that they are good enough to give him more credit for having escaped them than he ought to claim, takes this opportunity to make a transfer of a great part of their

good wishes to Lieut. Morris and the other brave officers and the crew under his command for their many great exertions and prompt attention to orders while the enemy were in chase."

Nearly three days and three nights this chase continued, when, with a light breeze, the "Constitution" drew away from her pursuers. Twice afterwards she escaped from superior British forces.

The capture of the British frigate "Guerriere," one of the pursuing squadron, was effected by Capt. Hull on the 19th of August, 1812, after an encounter of about thirty minutes. In this first battle of the "War of 1812," as it is called by historians, the "Constitution" lost fourteen men killed and wounded, and the "Guerriere" seventy-nine killed and wounded. The masts of the "Guerriere" were shot away, and she was in such a sinking condition that it was found impossible to take her into port, and she was accordingly set on fire, and soon afterward blew up. This great naval battle did more than millions of money could have done to put courage into the hearts of the people; its value has never been over-estimated.

After the capture of the "Guerriere," Capt. Hull took the nation's favorite into Boston, where he and his officers received a perfect ovation from its citizens.

From Long Wharf, where he landed, along State Street to the Exchange Coffee House, the

crowds of citizens were immense. (In this battle his efficient first lieutenant, Charles Morris, was dangerously wounded.) In the evening a brilliant entertainment was given in his honor at Faneuil Hall, where plates were laid for six hundred. The late Col. Henry Sargent prepared the decorations, and Lucius Manlius Sargent recited an original ode. In fine, the whole country was electrified, and the entire heart of the nation beat high in praise of Isaac Hull.

Great Britain had for some years claimed, among other things, her invincibility upon the seas, and her right to search American merchantmen, and to take out any seamen who had no protection, claiming them as British sailors, and, in general, the right to annoy our commerce in every way. As far back as 1809 occurred the miserable episode of the "Leopard" and "Chesapeake" (that most unfortunate of vessels), when Capt. Barron of the latter surrendered to the former after hardly a struggle, and having had four Americans taken from his deck by Capt. Humphries of the "Leopard." Five years later, at the close of the War of 1812, two of these four were returned by the British government on the deck of the "Chesapeake," one having died, and the other being beyond the reach of human government, having been hung at Halifax on the plea that he was

an Englishman. For this sad result Capt. Barron was suspended for five years. Commodore Stephen Decatur (than whom no braver man ever lived), it is said, but not with certainty, charged Commodore Barron with cowardice upon this occasion, which led to a duel. Barron was severely wounded, and Decatur was killed. One of our writers says:—

“They fought at Bladensburg in Maryland, a small town, now almost a deserted village, named after Gov. Bladen of that State. The world-famous duelling ground was about a mile west from the village, just outside the line separating the District of Columbia from Maryland.

“Civilization may complacently gaze at this far-away nook, and reflect that the world would have to retard, instead of advance, could the duel ever again revive. It was the mediaeval ‘wages of battle;’ it made the trick of the weapon the verdict of the jury; it disguised murder under the name of chivalry; it was a fraud and a delusion, with human vanity alone making the lie real. ‘Confess,’ said the priest to a dying Neapolitan nobleman who had fought fourteen duels to prove that Dante was a greater poet than Ariosto, ‘confess that Ariosto was the greater poet.’—‘Father,’ answered the dying man, ‘to tell you the truth, I have never read either Dante or Ariosto.’ The Barron and Decatur duel grew out of a fancied insult, nothing more; and it is said that when shots had been exchanged, and both were lying upon the ground, one dying, the other severely wounded, they shook hands, and their old friendship brought tears into their eyes. All animosity had then ceased; but the brave Decatur, whose name ranks on the first page of our naval history, who had won promotion before

Tripoli, and whose rise thereafter was steady and brilliant, until it culminated in the capture of the British frigate 'Macedonian' by the American frigate 'United States,' under his command, tarnished his honorable life on the duelling ground at Bladensburg. Barron, who survived the duel, was in England when the War of 1812 broke out. On his return he applied for active service and a ship. His application met with resistance; he was despised by his fellow-officers, and his absence from the country during her hour of need was severely commented upon. Gossip became busy, and it was reported to Barron that Decatur was the foremost of his persecutors. Then there began a long correspondence between the two. Mutual friends widened the breach; and at last Barron, stung to madness at the imputation of cowardice everywhere thrust upon him, challenged Decatur.

"No man of his time was more skilled in the use of a weapon than Decatur; no man more of an adept in duelling. It had been to him a pastime from his school-days up. He unhesitatingly accepted Barron's challenge, and with fastidious nicety prepared his worldly affairs. He wrote his will, kissed his sleeping wife good-by, and rode out on the raw, chilly morning of March 22, 1820, to seek his death at the accursed spot of Bladensburg. Great personages were they who stood in that narrow gully at the meeting. The American navy was well represented. Great decorum prevailed in the choice of corners and the measures of distance. The two principals, haughty, dignified, self-possessed ever, observed in silence the arrangements made for the death of one, and the question must have suggested itself, which? All being in readiness, the principals were placed back to back; their orders were to turn at the word 'Present,' and not to fire before the word 'One,' nor after the word 'Three.' Eight paces distant from each other, they swung around at the word 'Present.' Each saw the face

of the other, the rising sun, and the barren landscape; one for the last time, but which?

“At the cry ‘One,’ each took deadly aim: to miss fire meant death.

“‘Two.’ Both pistols were discharged simultaneously, and both men fell. Both men were wounded in the hip. The ball which struck Decatur glanced upward, severing the blood-vessels in the abdomen. His time had come.

“Both men were hustled from the field, Barron away from the city and chance prosecution, Decatur back to his elegant home. He lingered far into the night, and died in great agony. The affair created intense excitement all over the country. ‘A cursed shame!’ said the few opposed to murder disguised under the name of the duel. ‘Unfortunate in its results!’ exclaimed the many advocating the code. Barron suffered from his wounds for many months, and finally died in 1851, having gained nothing in life that clung to his name with the tenacity of his reputation as the slayer of Decatur.”

The late Commodore Jesse D. Elliott, who was in command of the Charlestown Navy Yard when Capt. Dewey sawed off the head of Gen. Jackson from the bows of “Old Ironsides,” was Barron’s second on the occasion.

To return to the “Constitution.” Isaac Hull, a New England sailor, had in thirty minutes stripped Great Britain of her naval prowess. This victory was followed up by that of the “Constitution” under Commodore William Bainbridge over the “Java,” and by the same frigate under Commodore Charles Stewart over the “Cyane” and “Levant.”

Thus "Old Ironsides" became a household word, and she was known the world over as the lucky ship of the navy. Commodore Hull carried his prisoners into Boston, and for the second time was enthusiastically received. These two brilliant exploits have endeared his name to posterity, and he ranks in the naval history of the world, not only as the possessor of admirable skill as a seaman, but as one of the bravest and most gallant officers of the War of 1812.

After the treaty of Ghent, December 24, 1814, by which peace was declared (which treaty, it will be remembered, was signed by John Quincy Adams, J. A. Bayard, Henry Clay, Jonathan Russell, and Albert Gallatin as commissioners on the part of the United States), Capt. Hull with his fellow-officers retired to the more peaceful duties of shore life.

He was for many years at the head of the navy board of commissioners, and in command of the Pacific and Mediterranean squadrons, serving his country with great honor and credit. He died in Philadelphia, February 3, 1843, universally beloved and esteemed for his many virtues.

The history of the "Constitution," or "Old Ironsides," is so identified with the life of Commodore Hull that I hope to be pardoned for alluding to the exploits of this public favorite, and perhaps

repeating much that is already known. But I doubt if the present generation know much more than tradition concerning this wonderful vessel. Fenimore Cooper, in his "Old Ironsides," published in Putnam's Magazine of 1853, and Abbott, in his "Blue-Jackets of 1812," have done much to keep alive the memory of this noble ship, for which they are entitled to the thanks of every American. With the aid of these and older publications, I propose to give some facts concerning the old ship, which may prove of general interest: —

In the year 1794 the Congress of the United States ordered the building of six frigates. Three were sold on the stocks, and three were completed at a cost of about \$300,000 each; viz., the "Constitution," "United States," and "Constellation." The first was built in Boston, the second in Philadelphia, and the last-named at Baltimore, and upon an entirely new plan; that is, with carronades on a flush spar deck and thirty long 24-pounders on the main deck. The usual metal for a frigate was an 18-pounder. The plans for these frigates were made by Joshua Humphreys, a shipbuilder of Philadelphia, who was father of one of our former naval constructors of great ability. The builder who had charge of the "Constitution" was Mr. George Claghorn; but the foreman, who

was known to be a very efficient mechanic, was Mr. Edmund Hart, who, singularly enough, was also the father of a former naval constructor. The shipyard was in Ship Street, between the present Winnisimmet Ferry and Fish Street. Mr. Hart's name appears in the directory of the day as "shipwright," along with that of George Claghorn, both having shipyards on the same street.

The "Constitution" was two years in building, and, at the first and second attempts to launch her, stuck on the ways. The third attempt was successful. Her figurehead was a Hercules bearing a club, until, during the second term of President Jackson, the god was taken down, and the hero of New Orleans put in its place. To show the feeling of the people in the early days of our republic, I insert a description of the launch of the "Constitution," from a journal of the day:—

"THE CONSTITUTION LAUNCHED OCTOBER 21, 1797.

"WEDNESDAY, October 25, 1797.

"The spring tides the latter part of last week giving the workmen in the naval yard an opportunity to complete the ways for launching the frigate 'Constitution,' Col. Claghorn, anxious to give as early information of the intended operation as possible, directed a gun to be fired at daylight on Saturday morning last, as a signal that at full sea he should move her

into her destined element. Before noon a very anxious and brilliant collection of citizens assembled at the spectacle: and at 12.15, at the first stroke at the spur shores, she commenced her movement into the water with such steadiness, majesty, and exactness as to fill almost every breast with sensations of joy and delight superior by far to the mortification they had already experienced. Such was the obliquity of the ways, that she came to anchor within two hundred yards of them without the least strain, or meeting or causing the most trifling accident; and she now rides at her moorings in the harbor, a pleasant sight to those who contemplate her as the germ of a naval force which, in no remote period of time, will protect the flag of the United States from the depredations of piratical marauders.

“As soon as the enlivening burst of gratulation was heard from the ship, her ordnance on shore replied to the shouts and joined with the huzzas of the citizens on the adjacent shores, demonstrating the lively interest the great body of the people took in her safety, and evidenced the popularity of the government by whose direction she was built.

“The best judges have pronounced the ‘Constitution,’ like her archetype, to be a perfect model of elegance and strength, and every individual employed in her construction appears to pride himself in having assisted at the production of this ‘*chef d’œuvre* of naval architecture.’

“Col. Claghorn’s skill, prudence, and intelligence have been freely bestowed, and the United States are under obligations to Gen. Jackson, Capt. Nicholson, and Major Gibbs for their indefatigable care and attention in the superintendency of the various departments necessary to her equipment. If the well-deserved fame of Messrs. Skillings as carvers could receive an addition, we should pronounce their workmanship, which decorates the frigate, a masterpiece of theirs. Indeed, in no

part of the work in the hull or rigging can the strength and beauty be exceeded, and the eulogiums of foreign naval gentlemen have been warm and explicit in her favor.

“May the ‘hoary monarch’ of the element on whose bosom she now reclines protect her with his trident; and whenever her departure into the waste of his realm may be necessary, may propitious breezes waft her to the haven of peace, or aid her to hurl the vindictive thunder of national vengeance on the disturbers of her country’s repose, or the depredators on the lawful commerce of her citizens.”

Recurring to the escape of the “Constitution” from the British squadron, heretofore spoken of, Cooper, than whom no one was more fitted to judge, says:—

“The chase off New York brought the ‘Constitution’ largely before the public mind. It is true that this exploit was not one of a character to excite the same feeling as a successful combat, but men saw that the ships and crews that could achieve such an escape from a British squadron must both of them have the right stuff for a glorious marine. It was the good fortune of ‘Old Ironsides’ to correct two of the illusions of that portion of the people which had faith in English superiority in all things, by first demonstrating that a Yankee man-of-war could get away from her enemy when there was occasion for the attempt, and that she could deal roughly with him when the motive for avoiding an action did not exist.”

Capt. Dacres indorsed the following challenge on the register of the merchant ship “John Adams,” on her return from Lisbon to New York

(she having a British license), after the escape of the “Constitution” from the British fleet:—

“Capt. Dacres, commander of his Britannic Majesty’s frigate ‘Guerriere’ of 44 guns, presents his compliments to Commodore Rogers of the United States frigate ‘President,’ and will be very happy to meet him, or any other frigate of equal force to the ‘President,’ for the purpose of having a social *tete-a-tete*.”

On the arrival of the “John Adams” at New York, Capt. Dacres’s challenge was copied into all the newspapers of the day, and had a wide circulation all over the United States. It is related that before the war the “Guerriere” and “Constitution” were lying in the Delaware, and the two captains, Dacres and Hull, happening to meet at some entertainment on shore, in a good-natured way discussed the merits of their respective navies. “Well,” said Hull at last, “you may just take good care of that ship of yours if ever I catch her in the ‘Constitution.’” Capt. Dacres, who is represented as having been a more than ordinarily good-humored gentleman, offered to bet money that the too confident Hull would be the loser in the event. “No,” said Hull, “I’ll bet no money, but I will wager a hat that the ‘Constitution’ will prove the victor.” The bet was made. After the famous fight

alluded to, the officer who was sent on board the frigate said, "Capt. Hull presents his compliments, sir, and wishes to know if you have struck your flag."

Capt. Dacres looked significantly at the shattered masts of his ship, and responded dryly, "Well, I don't know. Our mizzenmast is gone, and our mainmast is gone; and on the whole I think you may say we have struck our flag." When Capt. Dacres went on board the "Constitution," and was shown into the cabin where Capt. Hull was, he unclasped his sword from his side and handed it silently to the victor. "No," said Capt. Hull, "I'll not take a sword from one who knows so well how to use it, but I will trouble you for that hat." It is added by a chronicler that a shade of perplexity passed over Capt. Dacres's countenance until he recollected the wager of a year or so before, and all was well again.

The speed of the "Constitution," by her log-book of 1809, was thirteen and one-half knots, going free under top-gallant sails. In 1844 she made fourteen knots off Cape Frio, Brazil, with the same rig, under the command of that old sea-dog John Pereival, who, by the way, was first lieutenant under Hull in the frigate "United States" when the latter was in command of the Pacific

squadron in 1828. "Mad Jack," as he was called, was one of the best sailors our navy has produced. He told me that Hull knew as much more than he did, as Christ knew more than one of the apostles. This was his way of expressing himself, forcibly and to the point. Also he told me much about Commodore Hull which, I am sorry to say, I have forgotten; but this I do remember: When Commodore Hull commanded the Mediterranean squadron, his flagship was the "Ohio," 74 guns, and Capt. Percival was in command of the "Cyane." Orders were given to the fleet to proceed to a certain port. It was usual for the squadron to slacken sail and let the flagship go ahead; but, lo and behold! when the "Ohio" and the others arrived at their destination, the "Cyane" was there at anchor. When "Mad Jack" went on board the "Ohio" to pay his respects to the Commodore, he was taken to task by Hull for "forging ahead;" whereupon Percival said, "Give me the 'Ohio' when we go back, and you take the 'Cyane,' and I'll get there first."—"I have no doubt you would," said Hull, "for, Jack, you are the best sailor I ever saw."

The following song was quite current in the navy, and was often sung on board the "Constitution" when she was the home of the writer for three years, from 1843 to 1846: —

“CONSTITUTION” AND “GUERRIERE.”

(Action of August 19, 1812.)

It ofttimes has been told
 That the British seamen bold
 Could flog the tars of France so neat and handy, oh !
 But they never found their match
 Till the Yankees did them catch.
 Oh, the Yankee boys for fighting are the dandy, oh !

The “Guerriere,” a frigate bold,
 On the foaming ocean rolled,
 Commanded by proud Dacres, the grandee, oh !
 With as choice a British crew
 As a rammer ever drew,
 Could flog the Frenchmen, two to one, so handy, oh !

When this frigate hove in view,
 Says proud Dacres to his crew,
 “Come, clear ship for action, and be handy, oh !
 To the weather gage, boys, get her ;”
 And to make his men fight better,
 Gave them to drink gunpowder mixed with brandy, oh !

Then Dacres loudly cries,
 “Make this Yankee ship your prize :
 You can in thirty minutes, neat and handy, oh !
 Twenty-five’s enough, I’m sure ;
 And if you’ll do it in a score,
 I’ll treat you to a double share of brandy, oh !”

The British shot flew hot,
 Which the Yankees answered not
 Till they got within the distance they called handy, oh !

“ Now,” says Hull unto his crew,
 “ Boys, let’s see what we can do ;
 If we take this boasting Briton, we’re the dandy, oh ! ”

The first broadside we poured
 Carried her mainmast by the board,
 Which made this lofty frigate look abandoned, oh !
 Then Dacres shook his head,
 And to his officers said,
 “ Lord ! I didn’t think those Yankees were so handy, oh ! ”

Our second told so well,
 That their fore and mizzen fell,
 Which doused the royal ensign neat and handy, oh !
 “ By George ! ” says he, “ we’re done ; ”
 And they fired a lee gun,
 While the Yankees struck up “ Yankee Doodle Dandy,” oh !

Then Dacres came on board
 To deliver up his sword,
 Though loath was he to part with it, it was so handy, oh !
 “ Oh, keep your sword,” says Hull,
 “ For it only makes you dull ;
 Cheer up and take a little drink of brandy, oh ! ”

Now fill your glasses full,
 And we’ll drink to Captain Hull,
 And so merrily we’ll push the brandy, oh !
 John Bull may toast his fill,
 But let the world say what they will,
 The Yankee boys for fighting are the dandy, oh !

During the three years from 1843 to 1846 my
 home was in “ Old Ironsides,” in the course of

which she sailed 52,379 miles; and I cannot be blamed for a most affectionate regard for her, which, perhaps, may have led me into idolizing the veteran who so nobly carried her through so many perils. It is just the Isaac Hulls who come to the front when their country needs their services. When I went on board the "Constitution," a lad of eighteen, she had the same armament that she had when she captured the "Guerriere," "Java," and "Cyane" and "Levant," and they bore marks of conflict upon them. The binnacle in use was the one taken from the "Java." Also, we had on board the marine who, stationed in the maintop, shot Capt. Lambert of the "Java." When we went into Singapore, in 1845, with a sick-list of two hundred sailors, the first man to welcome us and offer us medical assistance was Commodore Chads of the British squadron then in port, who was first lieutenant of the "Java," and surrendered her to the "Constitution," and who afterward became Sir Henry Ducie Chads, K. C. B., and died an admiral of the British navy in 1868. I well remember the kindness of Commodore Chads, and a remark he made to Capt. Percival, our commander: "The 'Constitution,' in her battle with the 'Java,' was manœuvred in a masterly manner, and it made me regret that she was not British. But," said he, "it was 'Greek met Greek,' for we were the same

blood, after all." I wrote this home to my friends March 20, 1845, and have the letter before me now. All these things appear to me now like a dream that has passed and gone, but those were pleasant years. We had a fine crew of four hundred sailors and excellent officers; and although storms were frequent, it always cleared away.

Let us try to keep green the memory of such men as Hull, Bainbridge, Decatur, Stewart, and their contemporaries — the men who, by their bravery, placed their country among the nations of the earth.

Excuse me, my dear Mr. Burrage, if, like an old sailor, I have been tedious in my story.

Very truly,

BENJ. F. STEVENS.

Boston, February 11, 1890.



